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To Honorable Judge Englemayer

I hope my letter reaches you in good health. I am very pleased and thankful to have this opportunity to articulate and express to you how I truly feel about the ordeal I am living. I would like to begin by saying that I sincerely acknowledge and take full responsibility for my actions. I was wrong. The practice of Islam is important to me, but my actions and thoughts were a deviation to its teachings. I understand the damage that ISIS has caused in the U.S. and why my actions would scare people. Judge Englemayer, I am not that. I was lost. I was looking for something to belong to. Maybe you think I am cold-blooded and unsympathetic to human life, but that is not who I am. I do certainly value my life and the lives of others. I would have never actually harmed anyone. I took the wrong route to try to solve my issues. I made a mistake. The biggest one in my 30 years of living. I am human. I do feel the sentiment of shame and pity. Judge Englemayer, I am truly regretful for what I put myself into and for everything I did that led me to lose my freedom. Forgive me for I would like to apologize. I am genuinely sorry. I am sorry to you Judge Englemayer, to the

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court and to everyone who is effected by my toxic mindset and actions. This mindset degraded me. In some ways I feel that I am actually fortunate to have been arrested. It stopped me from making an even bigger mistake and taking part in a group that causes a lot of harm. Getting arrested also gave me peace in a way. Other than being with my husband, it was the first time I had peace in a living environment. I lived with my family for 28 years. My siblings and I were raised by an abusive mother and a neglectful father. My parents were born and raised in Yemen with strict cultural values. They entered America 2 years before I was born. My mother had no other job than being a homemaker and my dad was sucked into South Yemeni politics with no stable job. My mother was taught by her mother that children need to be obedient and in order to make them obedient they need to be beaten. She took that to an extreme level because my siblings and I were all born and raised in America. She didn't like for us to assimilate to another culture. Another reason was because she too was abused by her mother.

My mother started her abuse before I learned how to walk. I found out one day from

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watching home videos with my siblings. We were shocked to watch a scene where my mother gave me a big slap across my thigh to hush me while she changed my diaper. Another one showed her pulling my hair while she brushed it to stop me from moving around too much. I cried in both scenes. As I grew up the abuse worsened. It went from smacking me as an infant to making me bleed when I reached my toddler years. It is an incident I will never forget. My mother was getting me ready to go to a wedding. After she finished I started to be annoying to her; running around and asking her for too much. After a couple of attempts in trying to hush me, she got fed up, took her heel and hit me on top of my head. Blood gushed out immediately down my face and on to my dress. The most my dad did was scream at my mother that she should not have done that, then take me to the bathroom to clean me up. I had an open wound the size of a dime. My dad never dared to take me to the emergency room to get stitches because he did not want my mother to get into any trouble. After they cleaned me up, we attended the wedding. I still have the mark on my scalp today.

As I grew up I started to see my siblings get

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beat up also. We all were still very young. My mother used many different objects to beat us with. They changed as we got older. She started with her hand then shoes, clothes hangers, cooking utensils, and the most painful and used of all was a whip she made out of a broken cable wire which was used on us from middle school up until our adult years. If my father ever tried to intervene, she would hit him as well. My father did not protect us or prevent her from hitting us. Also, my mother liked to hit us when he wasn't around. There was a time she used a knife on one of my brothers and made him bleed. He did something my mother didn't like so she grabbed a knife to scare him but ended up getting too close and poking him with it several times. We were traumatized watching her do that to him. My brother was very young. It was the first time she did that and we were afraid it was going to be a new form of abuse for us. The marks and feelings I experienced with her are unforgettable. I associated my mother with fear. I grew up emotionally tired of her, but I loved her so it was confusing. She was supposed to show me love and care but in reality was the one hurting me the most. At times she would show her motherly affection but it would fade away too quickly. She would

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wipe our tears and apologize. Then hours later make them run down our faces again. It was mentally draining. I never felt a sense of security with her or my dad. Sometimes if there were big marks or scars on our arms from her abuse, she told us we needed to hide them and not let anyone know what was going on or we would be taken away. My siblings and I were also prevented from helping or protecting each other if one of us was getting beaten. If we did then that would cause us to also be beaten along side them. We would cry at times just hearing or seeing each other get abused. Sometimes we had to pretend that we were losing our breath just to try to get her to end the abuse as soon as she possibly can. We were emotionally and physically drained. In addition to the beatings my mother also used to scream at us regularly, throw things, spit, degrade and threaten us. I was raised with a lot of death threats. That was a method of hers for preventing me from doing anything she didn't like. My sister and I were treated much worse than our brothers because we were females. In our culture, females are raised to be obedient housewives. When I reached my high school years, my mom was very abusive to me. She thought it would keep me from having a boyfriend. I was

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starting to feel more anxious all the time and I felt that I was literally going crazy. I asked my dad if I could see a therapist or psychologist and he said no because it would ruin my marriage prospects. My sister and I were also bombarded with too many chores. Chores had to be done before homework. Sometimes there was too much that by the time I got to sit down for homework I was too exhausted. I missed a lot of assignments and didn't have enough time to study for exams. My grades plummeted especially in college where the work was difficult. My sister and I weren't allowed to stay in the school library at our university to do projects and homework. We also weren't allowed to have many friends who aren't Yemeni as they weren't accepted by my mother. If we got invited to a wedding, we were banned from going if they weren't from Yemen. My siblings and I had a difficult time with my parents regarding marriage. Islam teaches us that we are allowed to marry anyone of any culture as long as they are muslim. My parents would never allow us to marry anyone other than a Yemeni. Not only do they have to be Yemeni, but from a specific area in Yemen. I thought about running away often I even tried to run away in Saudi Arabia after my

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father and brother and I finished a religious ritual. When I was home in Alabama, I thought about running away all the time but I did not know how to go about it. I was also scared that my mother would find me and make good on her promise to kill me. I felt like I was in a prison in my own house. Then my sister left. I was shocked, angry and sad at first but then I found out about the free life she claimed to be living. It intrigued me. I thought she had freedom and acceptance because she joined ISIS. I saw a way out from the oppression I was living in. I was in my last year of university when she left. I shifted my goals from searching for a job after graduating to finding a way out of my long lived tribulations. I did not know anything about ISIS at that time, but I began to learn about them online. At the time their teachings made me feel like I could belong somewhere and that I could be protected. Now looking back, I see that my emotional and mental state made me susceptible to their online propaganda. When I found out my sister got married to someone from Bangladesh, I didn't even register that she married an ISIS fighter. I was just in awe that she was able

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to marry someone not from Yemen. My online life and my isolation led to me becoming more religious. It gave me solace. However, the older I got the more my parents were pushing me to marry someone they picked and who was from Yemen. I didn't want that so I came up with a plan to marry someone online who also wanted to leave the country. The search lasted a couple of years and during those years my mother was even harsher on me than usual because she had noticed my changes and was afraid. She still continues her beatings even though I was 28. When I met James, I know it may sound silly but he gave me the strength to finally leave. At the time we met online, I was very lonely. No one I felt comfortable with. It was debilitating. When I met James online he was very comforting to me and easy to talk to. He said even if we don't get married, he would still help me get out of that toxic environment. Finally I felt someone cared for me. It was such a profound feeling as I had never felt cared for or protected before. James and I got married and although we did discuss ISIS and planned on leaving the U.S. to join them, I realize now that these

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were the thoughts and feelings of individuals who were confused and traumatized.


This is the first time that I have publically spoken about the decades of abuse I suffered at home. I have learned through this journey that trauma needs to be discussed so that you can begin to heal from it. I could never discuss this because I was scared of my mom and scared of being taken away, I held it all inside. I realize this contributed to my lifelong anxiety, self isolation and depression. I just wanted to escape my home life. I have no desire to ever be a part of a terrorist organization. I am focused on my mental health. I have been taking courses focused on healthy coping skills such as exercise, reading, confiding in friends, prayer and meditation. I think these will help me deal with my trauma going forward, along with therapy. I have also learned new skills such as crochet. I took a business acumen course and I am currently taking Columbia University Courses; U.S. presidency & Slavery. This has opened my eyes on how to stay busy and productive.

Again, I am sorry Judge Englemayer for the harm that I have caused. I am sorry for my actions. I ask this court for leniency.

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Thank you for taking the time to read my letter. This is not offered as excuses for my actions on this case. I would just like you to understand what I had been going through my whole life.

Thank you,


ARWA MUTHANA